

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 8, 2007

THE CEDARS CONSERVATION PLAN PROJECT

File No. 06-103

Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$23,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust to develop the Cedars conservation plan including research, planning and landowner outreach in “the Cedars”, and negotiation for the possible acquisition of the 520-acre “Raiche-McCrory Property” within a 9 square mile area in western Sonoma County.

LOCATION: The Cedars, Sonoma County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Program

EXHIBITS:

Exhibit 1: The Cedars Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: The Cedars and Raiche-McCrory Property GIS Maps

Exhibit 3: View from the Raiche-McCrory Property

Exhibit 4: Serpentine Rock at the Raiche-McCrory Property

Exhibit 5: High pH Spring Pool at the Raiche-McCrory Property

Exhibit 6: Waterfall at the Raiche-McCrory Property

Exhibit 7: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed twenty-three thousand dollars (\$23,000) to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to develop a conservation plan including research, planning and landowner outreach in the “the Cedars”, and negotiation for the possible acquisition of the 520-acre “Raiche-

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McCrory Property” within a 9 square mile area in western Sonoma County, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, the SLT shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, and names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection of natural habitats and resources of regional importance as described in Section 31162.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Sonoma Land Trust is a private nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service Code whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to twenty-three thousand dollars (\$23,000) to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to develop a conservation plan including research, planning and landowner outreach in the “the Cedars”, and negotiation for the possible acquisition of the 520-acre “Raiche-McCrory Property” property within a 9 square mile area in western Sonoma County (Exhibit 1).

The Cedars is a distinct area in western Sonoma County characterized by the presence of Sergeant cypress and large expanses of serpentine rock. It is a highly unique region with exposed mantle rock (peridotite and serpentine), high pH value natural springs, endemic plants and microbial resources (Exhibit 7).

The proposed planning project will enable the SLT to develop a conservation plan for the Cedars area and to carry-out negotiations for potential acquisition of one 520-acre property within the Cedars owned by Roger Raiche and David McCrory. The SLT will conduct research on strategies for conservation, coordinate with potential funding partners and conduct outreach to property owners. The SLT will prepare all necessary documentation and negotiate the potential acquisition of the 520-acre Raiche-McCrory Property through this project. As the match to Conservancy funds, the SLT will provide an appraisal, Phase I Environmental Assessment, outreach with key neighboring property owners and allocate management and legal team resources toward the project.

In addition to negotiating for the possible public acquisition of the Raiche-McCrory Property, the SLT will provide a final report with the data compiled and strategy developed for the protection of the full Cedars area.

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Established in 1976, the mission of the Sonoma Land Trust is to protect the varied scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of present and future generations. The 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization has conducted numerous successful planning and acquisition projects with support from the Conservancy, including the recent acquisition of the 910-acre Red Hill property on the Sonoma Coast.

Site Description:

The approximately 9 square mile area of Sergeant cypress and serpentine rock landscape known historically as the Cedars is located seven miles east of the Sonoma coast and forty minutes north from the town of Cazadero in western Sonoma County. The Cedars as a whole rises to an elevation of approximately 2,000 feet with a series of canyons and sloping hillsides. The area forms the separation for the headwaters of the Russian River, the Gualala River and Austin Creek. The 520-acre Raiche-McCrory Property in the Cedars is bordered by Bureau of Land Management property to the east and series of private property owners' parcels to the north, west and south (Exhibit 2).

The distinct moonscape appearance of the Cedars is due to the presence of peridotite mantle rock and the serpentine rock which forms as peridotite reacts with water over time (Exhibit 3). Parts of the Cedars receive heavy winter rains (four times that of San Francisco). At the same time, temperatures exceed 100 degrees in parts of the area during the summer. The unique properties of the Cedars stem from the geologic processes related to the special type of rock, the high pH (ultrabasic) springs that are present on the property and the variety of plant and wildlife that exist as a result of the extreme habitats created in this environment (Exhibit 4).

Project History:

Botanist Roger Raiche, current owner of 520-acres of the Cedars area, has been involved with documenting the unique resources on the property over the past twenty-five years. Over the past twenty years he has worked with the University of California Botanical Gardens' California Native Plant section in Strawberry Canyon. With partner David McCrory, Raiche purchased this property in the late 1990s with the intent of protecting its biological and other natural resources. Raiche has worked to develop trails to the major sites of interest on the property including the high pH springs, a deep pool known as "the Grotto", the main canyon and large waterfall with calcium formations (Exhibits 5 and 6). The owners have hosted scientists and provided educational tours to promote awareness and study of the botanical, geological and microbiological resources found on the property.

Scientists and researchers from the University of California, Stanford University, University of Southern California and Delft University in the Netherlands have expressed strong support for the importance of the Cedars (Exhibit 7). A number of scientists have focused on the potential for research on the rare microbial processes taking place in the high pH waters of the Cedars. According to one, "The Cedars represents one of the few places on Earth, where mantle rock is exposed to the surface...and may represent a rare

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reminder of what Earth looked like a few billions of years ago...California possess a rare gem of Nature, which needs to be preserved and secured for future generations”. Interest in the Cedars has also generated a film, “What’s Up in the Universe?” which will be aired on National Public Television.

The SLT and partners in the West County/Coastal Collaborative Working Group facilitated by the Conservancy have included the Cedars in priorities identified for western Sonoma County. The SLT has worked with the current property owners to conduct tours with the Conservancy, Department of Fish and Game, the Bureau of Land Management and the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. The owners are interested in pursuing discussions with the SLT for the conservation of the Cedars, particularly for its continued use for scientific research.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$23,000
Sonoma Land Trust (in-kind)	<u>\$19,500</u>
Total Project Cost	\$42,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy’s FY06/07 appropriation from Proposition 40 (“California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002). The Conservancy is authorized to use Proposition 40 bond funds for purposes consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Public Resources Code Section 5096.352) including the protection of natural habitats and resources of regional importance as is proposed in the Cedars conservation plan project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Cedars conservation plan project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 (Section 31160 et seq.) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection of resources of regional importance in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pursuant to Section 31162 (b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open space resources of regional importance. The proposed project will protect the regionally important natural resources and habitat through planning for potential acquisition of the Raiche-McCrory Property.

Consistent with Section 31163(a) of the criteria for the Bay Program, the proposed project is a cooperative effort a private land trust and other potential funding partners and will work with willing sellers for potential land acquisition in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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Consistent with Section 31163(b) and (c) the project will serve a multi-regional constituency, has public and private partners and includes matching funds to leverage those of the Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan as it supports the following Goals and Objectives:

Goal 4 – Objective A: by acquiring significant coastal resource properties and areas for habitat and wildlife corridors;

Goal 5 – Objective B: by protecting biological diversity in coastal areas and inland habitat areas;

Goal 10 – Objective A: by acquiring watershed areas and regionally significant property in the San Francisco Bay Area.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** There is strong support for protecting the Cedars among conservation partners and scientists familiar with its resources including Susan Harrison of the University of California, Kenneth Nealson of University of Southern California and Gijs Kuenen of Delft University (For letters of support, see Exhibit 6).
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located forty minutes north of the town of Cazadero and seven miles in from the coast in western Sonoma County.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is necessary to move quickly on the opportunity to protect the unique features of the Cedars. The project will support the Conservancy's mandate to conserve special resources for the purpose of scientific study and wildlife and habitat protection.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The unique properties found only in the Cedars area are of greater-than-local interest for scientific research and attract scientists from the

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United States and abroad.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** An opportunity exists now as the Raiche-McCrory Property owners are interested in selling the property in order to provide long term protection of the resources.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed Cedars conservation plan and potential acquisition will protect the unique habitat of the Cedars, enable scientific access to the resources and also provide potential for a future trail corridor between Austin Creek State Parks and properties leading out to the coast (See Exhibit 2).
9. **Leverage:** The SLT will provide a 46% match to leverage Conservancy funds. The SLT will obtain an appraisal, complete the Phase I Environmental Assessment and allocate senior staff time to the project.
10. **Readiness:** The SLT has been working with the Raiche-McCrory Property owners over the past year and is prepared to move forward with the proposed project.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** The SLT is a regional conservation partner with a record of collaboration with the Conservancy, State Parks, Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, private property owners and conservation organizations and regular participation in the Conservancy led West County/Coastal Collaborative Acquisition Working Group.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Cedars lies outside the Coastal Zone and is not under the jurisdiction of Sonoma’s Local Coastal Program. The proposed project is consistent with the Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General plan which calls for the protection of the county’s water, forest and biotic resources (Sections 3.0, 4.0 and 5.1). In particular, the project will provide for the protection of unique habitat and rare and endangered species through conservation planning and acquisition of property in the Cedars area (Section 5.2).

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Cedars project involves only planning studies for actions the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded, and is therefore statutorily exempt from CEQA review pursuant to 14 CCR Section 15262. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.